



Best Practice Guide to Vessel Handling While Whale Watching in the Northeast U.S. Region

While watching whales, one must be aware of situations that arise while working with different species as well as their varying behavior. Following are a few considerations for operators while viewing certain species.

Note: These considerations are based on experience and observation and not on science.

For successful and unobtrusive whale watching, operators should:

- closely observe the behavior of the whale(s) to be viewed
- approach slowly, follow the whale's course of action, and act accordingly
- give the whale(s) ample space and do not interfere with its direction of travel.

The Whale-Watching guidelines should be observed for all approach and departure procedures on all species of whales. Regulations should be adhered to when encountering a North Atlantic right whale. The descriptions of selected species below are provided as a tool to help better understand basic habits or movements of each species. This may reduce the risk of potential impacts while watching.

Finback Whales

Finbacks often are observed swimming in what appears to be linear travel. They primarily are seen alone or on occasion in small groups. They are known for their speed and have been nicknamed the "greyhound" of the sea.

Finbacks will move in random directions looking for food at a fair rate of speed and can come surface in any location with an explosive spout. Their feeding lunges can be made at great speeds, slowing afterwards and then lunging again. On these occasions the pilot must take the most precaution, not moving until the whale has resurfaced. . Finbacks feed alone and in small groups.

It has been noted that finback whales will rest just below the surface of the water or deeper and out of view. In rough or large seas, finbacks have been observed riding the seas or swells at great speeds with only their dorsal fins breaking the surface. Attempting to get a close view can be difficult if not impossible. Primarily, finbacks act 'business like' and tend to go about their business without notice or interest to vessel traffic.

Finbacks have been known to give a close approach although on rare occasion. The finback calf is likely to do this than the adults..

Although it appears that the finback is aware of vessel traffic, the operator of the vessel must be cautious. Paralleling the whales' course and speed at times can be difficult as it may travel at speeds of 10 knots or more, greater than the recommended speed in the NMFS guidelines. Best viewing opportunities occur when the whale's right side is viewed because its white lower jaw will be visible (greenish in color) when the whale is just below the surface. .



Humpback Whale

The humpback whale is the most sought after whale for whale watching because of its acrobatic behaviors ranging from breaching to slapping its tail or flippers on the surface of the water.

Always avoid getting in front of the whales breaching path. Other surface display behaviors include tail breach and tail lob-tailing. The whale tends to stay in a more confined area with little or minimum travel. Again, careful observation is necessary so as not to interfere with the whale's behavior. Flipper slapping occurs when the animal lies on its side, or back, and slaps one or both of its pectoral flippers on the surface. Forward momentum is often observed during this behavior. They will often go in random directions and be more oblivious to their surroundings so more precautions should be taken.

Humpbacks display a great variety of feeding techniques and behaviors.. One of the most spectacular is the bubble cloud or bubble net formation, where they emit a large cloud or ring of bubbles through which they surface. They will feed alone or in small or large groups often separating then regrouping (this can happen in extremely large groups of 15+ animals). Caution must be taken when whales feed in large groups or you are in an area where several small groups are feeding. If your vessel is in the middle of a feeding aggregation, keep your engines in neutral and wait for the animals to get clear of you. Feeding is often random and therefore unpredictable. You should be on the lookout for bubble clouds or nets to appear at the surface, sometimes followed by a large open mouth. The whales then filter out the water and continue feeding as long as there is sufficient prey. Stay well clear of bubble clouds and nets as the whale will come up through or beside the bubble array. Kick feeding is one technique that is wide-spread and variable. The whale slaps the water and dives often forming bubbles below or very near the area of the surface kick. The animals typically feed, and resurface, within the bubble formation.

Humpbacks are known for their curiosity and will sometimes approach near a vessel. At this time, the only course of action is to put the engines in neutral and wait for the whales to retreat. Any other course of action could harm the whale.

Humpbacks may also be observed logging or resting on or just below the surface. While the whales rest on the surface or just below, they can often go undetected unless sea conditions are optimal. This is where having trained observers really counts. While the whales rest, they often appear oblivious to their surroundings leaving them susceptible to a vessel strike. A proper lookout as well as an observant operator can minimize this risk by seeing subtle spouts in the distance, a back or a fin. While watching logging whales, it is important to ensure that the vessel does not drift down on them.

If the logging whales are a mother and calf you should minimize your time with them. The calf develops the most during its first year. It is important to minimize encounters with mothers and calves, especially when the calves are nursing. This can be seen by the calf swimming under the mother and surfacing, one side to the other. The calf of a humpback will often become curious of a vessel and the operator must be aware of this. A calf can seem to appear out of nowhere while the mother feeds or is on a dive.

Humpbacks can be seen alone or in small or large groups. They easily can be seen observed from either side because of their white flippers. These animals often fluke (raise their flukes) when sounding.



Minke Whales

Minke whales are the smallest of the baleen whales found in the northeast region. When viewing this species you will see a dolphin-like whale with a small, sickle-shaped dorsal fin. A light spout can be seen on cool or cold days. On closer observations, you will see the white stripe on the whale's flippers. The Minke whale often appears to move in random directions. It primarily is seen alone or in dispersed groups within a large area. They can be difficult to follow because of their small size and dark coloration. Their fluke prints often give away their location and direction of travel.

In this region, minkes tend to show little to no interest in vessels although they will on occasion give a vessel a close approach for a short period of time. They have also been observed riding the pressure wave or wake of a vessel on occasions. This should be avoided if possible.

While feeding, minkes can be seen in large dispersed groups. They seem to be oblivious to vessel traffic. Working through such a group requires additional caution. They tend to have shorter dive times than larger whales and can easily be lost from sight when working in chop or rough seas.

On occasion, you can see this species breaching and surfing large swells at fast speeds. At this time they can be difficult to follow or watch. Minkes have been observed heading toward vessels underway.



Right Whale

This is the most endangered whale species within the northeast region. **Federal regulation prohibits approaches within 500 yards.** All sightings must be reported to the NMFS Sighting Advisory System (pager: 978-585-8473 or USCG on VHF 16) as soon as possible so its position can be broadcast to vessels in the area to form a buffer zone. Callosities on the head, lack of a dorsal fin and a smooth-edged triangular tail will best identify this species. Right whales have a V-shaped spout.

Right whales typically have long dive durations from 10 to 20 minutes and can reappear in any location. They can be seen skimming at, or just below, the surface of the water on plankton- often in linear travel then reversing their direction. Detection of these whales can be extremely difficult and are sometimes only noticed by footprints, or rippled water, near the surface.

Right whales often are seen alone or in widely scattered groups. They do not appear to be likely to react to vessel traffic. This has been detrimental as they often are struck by large ships resulting in their death. They often are sighted near the shoreline and in bays. These animals often fluke (raise their flukes) when sounding.



Sei Whale

Infrequently seen but worth noting. The sei whale is similar in size to a juvenile finback although its dorsal is sickle-shaped, unique to this species, and not as far back as a fin whale's. Additionally, it does not have a white, right lower jaw like the finback. Because of the shape of the dorsal fin, they sometimes are mistaken for a large minke whale. Sei whales have a ridge down the center of their rostrum and may have circular scars on their flanks. Sei whales tend to stay close to the surface and can often be followed by their surfacing fluke prints. Although rarely seen, this whale is not timid to vessel traffic and tends to let viewers get close. This can be problematic as they are fast and their movements often erratic. They seem to be aware of their surroundings. The short dive times and minimal dive depth make this a relatively easy whale to watch. Like right whales, they are plankton feeders and additional caution is needed when encountering sei whales as right whales may also be in the area. When feeding this whale tends to make subtle lunges on the surface, while on their side.



Pilot Whale

Pilot whales can be seen in large family groups. Their distinctive black body, round forehead and large rounded dorsal fin identifies this species. Pilot whales do not appear to be either interested or uninterested in vessel traffic. They appear to be aware of their surroundings. While feeding, these animals will dive after small fish and squid. Occasionally they will chase prey near the surface. They sometimes fluke (raise their tails) when diving and will often dive for 5-8 minutes. Pilot whales are known for riding the pressure wave of large ships but not large boats.



Dolphins

It is not uncommon for dolphins to be sighted near whales. They are both attracted to the same areas of dense prey. Dolphins will often follow whales and vessels and frequently approach vessels to ride the wake or pressure wave created from the bow. However, extra caution must be taken when both whales and dolphins are present near vessel traffic. Whales will often surface just below dolphins, or the dolphins will travel with the whale marking its location although this is not always the case. It is best practice to assume that, when dolphins are present, a whale is likely foraging in the same general area.

When feeding, dolphins can be seen moving in random directions, jumping out of the water and returning into the water at the same location. You can often see the dolphins in a feeding frenzy with high-speed movements and lots of slashing. When they are on the move, you can see groups of dolphins porpoising at high rates of speed in linear travel.

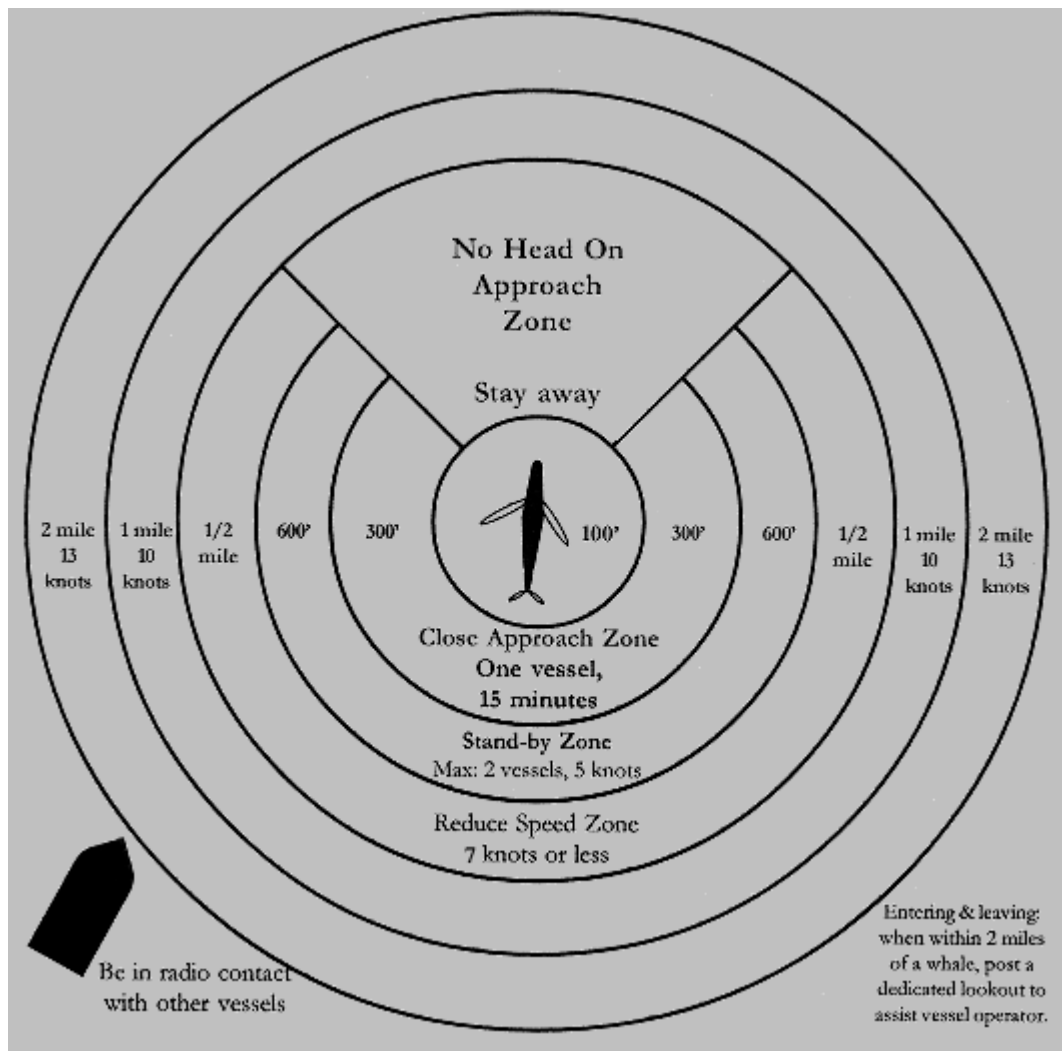
One of the most frequently sighted dolphin species in this area is the Atlantic white-sided. These animals frequently approach vessels to bow ride or wake jump. Common, white beaked and Risso's (*Grampus*) dolphins tend to be less attracted to vessels than do white-sided dolphins although caution is always recommended.



Whale watching with other vessels

While whale watching, you will eventually be in the same area as other whale watch vessels are bound to see another vessel doing the same thing you are, watching whales. When this occurs, it is important to know what the other vessel is doing. One of the first things to do is communicate with the operator of the other vessel regardless of vessel type (i.e. commercial whale watch vessel, recreational vessel, fishing vessel, etc). Doing this you can coordinate responsible viewing. Call the other vessel on a VHF radio on channel (9-13-16). If you approach the other vessel watching a whale you can ask them if they will move off at a given time so that you can get a look or even tell them that you will stand off 300' from them to look. Communication is very important while in multi-vessel approaches. Without it, many conflicts can arise and whales can be injured.

You can also ask other operators about whale species in the area and whale behavior. Such information can help you handle your vessel in a manner suitable for the conditions at hand. The more you know about the situation the better off you, the other vessel and the whales are.



Finback Whales

Speed: up to 15 knots

Size: up to 80 feet

Dive time average: 3 to 10 minutes

Feeding patterns: High-speed surface lunge feeding. Random location surfacing within a wide area, below surface filtering of water. Subsurface: longer dive times with little seen on surface, below surface filtering of water. Often high-speed travel to food concentration. Both individual and group feeding.

Travel pattern: Most often linear travel with various speeds and dive times. Porpoising at high rates of speed one minute dive times

Vessel interaction: Usually has little to no interest in vessels. Occasionally will get curious of a vessel but very rare. Best seen from right side of whale. Works around and appears to be aware of vessel traffic.

Species behavior: Tall column-like spout, very rare to fluke, long graceful dives, usually seen to be traveling or sub surface feeding.

Minke Whale

Speed: up to 10 knots

Size: up to 30 feet

Dive time average: 2 to 8 minutes

Feeding patterns: Moderate surface lunges. Often widely scattered in a group. Filtering of water rarely detected. Subsurface feeding.

Travel patterns: Often appears to travel in random directions. In widely scattered groups and alone. Species known to occasionally travel in wake of vessel or alongside.

Vessel interaction: Usually little or no interest in vessel although has been known to give close approaches for a short periods of time, 2 to 15 minutes. Species been known to head for larger vessels underway. Tends to be aware of vessel traffic but not always concerned.

Species behavior: Small spout, quick surface and dives. Occasionally breaches in rougher weather. Often seen in widely scattered groups.

Sei Whale

Speed: up to 15 knots

Size: up to 45 feet

Dive time average: 3 to 8 minutes

Feeding patterns: Subsurface feeding, surface feeding occasionally skimming surface on their side.

Travel patterns: Often travels just below surface so that fluke prints are usually detectable in fair weather. Linear and random travel. Usually travels in small or medium size groups.

Vessel interaction: Usually little or no interest in vessel. Works around and tends to be aware of vessel surroundings.

Species behavior: Column like spout, a steady speed when surfacing, often can be seen with steady fluke prints from their traveling just below surface. Usually seen in small groups.

Humpback Whale

Speed: up to 10 knots

Size: up to 55 feet

Dive time average: 3 to 8 minutes

Feeding patterns: Multiple feeding patterns. Bubble clouds or other like formations with open mouth and straining water at surface. Surface lunge with no bubbles. Bottom feeding with longer dive duration. Kick feeding with tail. Feeds in groups or alone.

Travel patterns: Linear travel often slow to moderate pace sometimes on or just below surface. Random deeper travel indicated by a fluking dive.

Vessel interaction: Occasionally gets curious of vessels often spending much time interested in a vessel. Works around and appears to be aware of vessel surroundings.

Species behavior: Round bushy spout, flukes often, breaches, slaps its flippers of tail on water surface, often seen resting on surface. Usually in tight or scattered groups. Also seen alone.

Right Whale

Speed: up to 8 knots

Size: up to 60 feet

Dive time average: 7 to 18 minutes

Feeding patterns: Often surface dragging in linear travel with a reverse in direction. Surface dragging with random directions. Slow movement while feeding.

Travel patterns: Often travels subsurface with long dive times appearing at a fare distance when in linear travel.

Vessel interaction: Little to no interest in vessel traffic. Has been known to be curious rarely. Not always aware of large ships or other vessels.

Species behavior: V-shaped spout, slow surfacing and fluking dives. Long dive times, occasional breaching and other surface displays.

Pilot Whale

Speed: up to 12 knots

Size: up to 20 feet

Dive time average: 3 to 10 minutes

Feeding patterns: Usually subsurface feeding. Often random movement herding prey. Usually feeds within a group

Travel patterns: Usually travels in a large family group. Surface and subsurface travel.

Vessel interaction: Little to no interest in vessel traffic. Has been known to bow ride large ships. Tends to be aware of vessel traffic.

Species behavior: small bushy spout. Can be seen resting on surface. Usually in large family group. Linear and random travel with fluking dives. Can be seen porpoising in high-speed travel. Breaching and striking surface of water with tail on occasion.

These are just a few of the most frequently seen whale species in the Northeast Region, other species can be seen as well at any given time.



U.S. Northeast Regional Whale Watch Guidelines Review

This is for all vessel operators Whale Watching in the Northeast Region. This is to keep pilots of such vessels up to date on the rules and regulations for Whale Watching.

Review information prior to filling out the exam.

Name: _____ Date: ____/____/____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip Code: _____

Mark all answers that apply.

- 1. When within ½ mile of whales location you should**
 - ☐ Avoid sudden changes in speed
 - ☐ Keep changing course and speed
 - ☐ Reduce speed to 10 knots
 - ☐ Turn away from the whale
- 2. When within the boundaries of the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary**
 - ☐ Continue with a steady course and speed
 - ☐ Reduce speed to 20 knots
 - ☐ Post a lookout for whales
 - ☐ Reduce speed to idle or 5 knots
- 3. When less than 600' of a whale you should**
 - ☐ Not approach the whale head-on
 - ☐ Stay ahead of the whale at all times
 - ☐ Reduce speed to 7 knots or less
 - ☐ Parallel course and speed of whale
 - ☐ Circle around the whale
- 4. Multi-vessel approach you should**
 - ☐ Get right in front of other boat
 - ☐ Call other vessel to coordinate a viewing time
 - ☐ Stay for 60 minutes maximum
 - ☐ Limit your time to 15 min when within 300 feet
 - ☐ Stay 300 to 600 feet when you are the stand-off vessel
- 5. Multi-vessels watching whales should limit there total viewing time to**
 - ☐ 15 minutes
 - ☐ 30 to 40 minutes
 - ☐ 40 to 60 minutes
 - ☐ No time limit
- 6. Multi-Vessel Whale Watch boats should**
 - ☐ Only have one vessel within 300 feet
 - ☐ Be in radio contact with other vessel(s) to coordinate viewing
 - ☐ Have 4 or 5 boats box in the whale
 - ☐ Have a maximum of 2 boats within 600 feet
 - ☐ Stay no longer than 15 minutes to view whale
- 7. When within 100 feet of a whale**
 - ☐ Avoid drifting down on a resting whale
 - ☐ Move in for a closer look
 - ☐ Keep engines out of gear until whale is observed clear of harms way from vessel
 - ☐ Do not approach whale within 100 feet
- 8. When should you post a lookout?**
 - ☐ When you are leaving port
 - ☐ When within 2 miles of any whales known location
 - ☐ When within the Stellwagen Bank Sanctuary
 - ☐ When within the shipping lanes
- 9. When you see a feeding whale**
 - ☐ Stay in front of the whale
 - ☐ Stay clear of bubble clouds
 - ☐ Give the whale ample space to work
 - ☐ Keep track of his feeding behavior
- 10. If you see a right whale**
 - ☐ Keep 500 yards from the whale
 - ☐ Move away from a right whale if within 500 yards
 - ☐ Use same guidelines as any other whale
 - ☐ Call the Northeast Early Warning System and give location
 - ☐ Make an urgent message broadcast if within shipping lanes and ships are visible
- 11. If you see an entangled whale**
 - ☐ Call the Northeast Disentanglement Network
 - ☐ Keep track of whale with other vessels as long as possible
 - ☐ Just avoid the whale all together
 - ☐ Call the US Coast Guard as soon as possible
- 12. When should you leave a whale?**
 - ☐ When a whale has a radical behavior change
 - ☐ When there are a large number of boats around the whale
 - ☐ When a whale abruptly travels away quickly
- 13. Should the guidelines be on the vessel?**
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No



14. A right whale can be viewed

- ☐ Only from 300 feet
- ☐ Only from 500 feet
- ☐ Only beyond 500 yards
- ☐ Never be viewed

15. Describe a Right Whale

- ☐ No dorsal fin
- ☐ Large dorsal fin
- ☐ White on underside of tail
- ☐ Smooth all black tail
- ☐ White barnacle like bumps on head

16. When following a finback into feeding humpbacks you should

- ☐ Reduce speed and watch for humpbacks
- ☐ Increase speed to get past humpbacks
- ☐ Idle engines and stay outside of feeding whales
- ☐ Go around feeding whales at an idle speed

17. Surface feeding finbacks tend to

- ☐ Keep a steady course
- ☐ Surface in random locations
- ☐ Surface very slowly
- ☐ Always blow bubbles showing their location
- ☐ Surface very quickly

18. Describe a finback whale

- ☐ Large whale up to 80 feet in length
- ☐ White patch on right side of head
- ☐ Always flukes on a deep dive
- ☐ Has a pointed dorsal fin in middle of back
- ☐ Has a pointed snout

19. What do you do when a whale gives you a close approach?

- ☐ You put your engines in reverse to get away
- ☐ You put your engines in idle for whales safety
- ☐ You call a mayday and seek help
- ☐ With multi-vessel approach you tell other vessel you cannot maneuver until whale leaves

20. How should you follow a whale?

- ☐ Stay ahead of it at all times
- ☐ Parallel its course and speed
- ☐ Go from one side of the whale to the other
- ☐ You should never follow a whale

21. Why is it important to be in radio contact when in multi-vessel approach?

- ☐ You can organize viewing time with other vessels
- ☐ You lessen the impact of multiple vessels around the whale
- ☐ Its nice to chat with the other boaters
- ☐ You know what the other vessel will be doing

22. Describe a Humpback Whale

- ☐ Usually has black and white pattern under its tail
- ☐ Has no dorsal fin
- ☐ Almost football shaped body and lifts its tail on a dive
- ☐ Has long white flippers

23. When viewing mother calf pairs

- ☐ Minimize viewing time when whales are resting
- ☐ Parallel course and speed of whales
- ☐ Stay just ahead of them if traveling
- ☐ If calf is nursing minimize viewing time

24. What may you see when a whale is in distress?

- ☐ Buoy being pulled from behind a whale
- ☐ A gray or discolored pigment in the whales skin color
- ☐ Breaching or flipper in the air from a whale
- ☐ Long dive times with erratic behavior

25. What should you do if a vessel will not leave a whale?

- ☐ Cut between the vessel and the whale
- ☐ Call the vessel to find out why they won't leave
- ☐ Leave the area and find another whale
- ☐ Call NMFS and make a complaint about the vessel

26. When can you increase speed after leaving a whale?

- ☐ As soon as you get ½ mile from the whale if its alone
- ☐ As soon as it goes on a dive
- ☐ 600 feet from the whale
- ☐ when your ½ mile from all whales in the area

27. What is the importance of a lookout?

- ☐ They keep track of the whales in the area
- ☐ They look for other boats in the area
- ☐ They may see something the operator of the vessel may miss
- ☐ They keep the operator company when watching whales

28. Why is it important to know about different species?

- ☐ So you can say you've seen different kinds
- ☐ So you know whether or not you can approach it
- ☐ So you know how it may react while watching it
- ☐ So you can get in front of it to see it real close

29. What should you do if you see a whale stranded on a beach?

- ☐ Go to it and push it off if you can
- ☐ Call the marine mammal stranding network
- ☐ Call the US Coast Guard
- ☐ See what kind of whale it is

30. What does the Marine Mammal Protection Act do?

- ☐ It keeps boaters from watching whales
- ☐ It protects the marine mammals from being hunted, harassed, or killed
- ☐ It only allows a short viewing time of whales